
Inspiration: All or Nothing

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This is the time of year when our young scholars set off to higher levels of education, many of them in secular colleges and universities. They go off with the Bible as the basis for what they believe and how they live, but sooner or later they will face the challenge: “Prove to me that the Bible is really from God, that it’s all true! It’s just another book!” They may even be told that serious scholars can’t let their religious beliefs cloud their judgment.

One of the reasons we put together this theme issue of *Clarion* is to help show why there are good reasons and sound arguments to accept that the Bible is what it claims to be: the very Word of God. But I want to be up front about the heart of the matter: neither I (nor anyone) can scientifically prove to you that the Bible is God’s Word and therefore is true and reliable in all it says. I can’t do that any more than I can scientifically prove to you that Jesus rose from the dead. Or that He walked on water. These things are matters of faith. Faith believes *all* that God has revealed in Scripture (Lord’s Day 7). And that faith rests on the *miracle* of the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture.

Inspiration – A Miracle

A miracle by its very definition is something extraordinary that takes place in *defiance* of what many regard as scientific norms. Scientists have observed millions of times over that when people die, they do not come back to life. No scientist has observed a resurrection or otherwise seen proof that a person once dead and buried has returned to life. Therefore, science does not accept that a dead person has ever been raised to life. Or that a living person has walked on water. Or that leprosy has been instantly healed. These are *miracles*, and you either believe miracles are possible and accept that Jesus has done each of these things or, quite simply, you do not.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit inspired some 40 men over the course of roughly 1400 years to write down the very words of God. God also guided the preservation of these writings through the centuries so that today we hold in our hands a faithful translation of God’s Word. For that reason, every word of it is true and reliable. This is a miracle to be accepted by faith or rejected by unbelief. There is no in-between position. As Christians, there is no need to hide from this or be ashamed of it. Like the kids sing: *I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E!*

Some Truth?

It seems that unbelievers are fairly clear about this, but some confessing Christians think there is a middle position. A church-going neighbour once commented to me that he believed the Bible “contained truth” but that it wasn’t necessarily *all* true. My question to him was: “how can you tell which parts are true and which are not?” The man did not have an answer – and for good reason: there is no way to tell! If your starting point is that the Bible contains a mixture of truth and error, what outside measuring rod can you use to determine which is which? In the end, you determine it for yourself.

What you are left with is a book of your own making, a collection of “truths” cherry-picked to suit your own tastes but which is in fact no truth at all. The next person does not agree with your selection of truth but rather prefers his own choices. And so he goes his own way with his “Bible” while you go your way with your “Bible” but neither of you possesses God’s truth. The Word of God stripped down in

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this way becomes simply another man-made religion. Either the whole Bible is God's Word and therefore true or none of it is. It's all or nothing.

Inspired Meaning?

I read somewhere that some Christians who accept God's inspiration of the Bible distinguish between the inspired *ideas* and the uninspired *words* and language. God's *message* is inspired, that is, the *meaning* behind the words, but the precise wording or form of language used is of strictly human origin and prone to error.

The question here is: how can you separate ideas from the words used to convey them? If you conclude that certain words are erroneous or imprecise or less than accurate, how do you determine the truth supposedly in-behind such words? After all, the words are the only access we have to the meaning God wishes to convey! Thus, for God's *message* to be comprehended accurately, the *words* used must be the precise words God chose to communicate that message. Each word must be divinely inspired or else we can never be certain of the meaning. Inspiration is an all or nothing affair.

Inspired Intention – For Faith Alone?

Some believers who accept the inspiration of Scripture offer a sophisticated nuance. They focus on God's *intention*. They want to separate the intention of God to convey matters about faith as opposed to Him intending to communicate matters about science or history (or similar scholarly pursuits). In other words, when God inspired men to write the various books of the Bible, His intention was to communicate all things necessary for our faith (for His own glory and our salvation), but He was not writing to satisfy the requirements of present-day scholarship. Therefore, one can't look to the Bible to answer questions of science and the Bible *shouldn't be expected to be accurate according to today's scientific standards. Or today's standards of historical scholarship.* The Bible has to be understood on its own terms and according to the intention for which it was written.

There is truth in this. Interpretation must keep in mind the purpose of God in writing what He wrote. Certainly, sound interpretation keeps in mind the genre of the writing (e.g. apocalypse or poetry or wisdom or narrative, etc.) and explains the text in keeping with its particular nature and in light of the wider context. But there is also something false in this – can the Word of God say in one breath something that is true for matters of faith and yet not for matters of science or history?

Truth cannot be divided. When God speaks, He only speaks truth and what He speaks is true for all of life. If a historical fact is mentioned, we must take it as true because it was inspired by God, even if modern historical scholarship cannot verify it. If an observation about creation or an event in this world (i.e. a matter of science) is recorded in the Bible, we must hold it as true because it was inspired by God – even if modern scientific investigation cannot explain it. This is a matter of faith.

Take the star seen by the Magi. This is both a historical fact and a scientific observation. Outside of the Bible, this event has no historical verification. In scientific theories, this event is completely unexplainable. Stars don't move in the sky with such precision as is described in Matthew 2:9. Yet it is true nonetheless. It's a miracle that humans cannot fathom but, because God wrote it in His book, we believe it happened and we believe it happened in the manner He has described. A Christian historian and a Christian scientist will take that as his starting point and work out theories from there. It's all or nothing.

Scripture's Own Testimony

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Nuance may be the in-thing in scholarship today but the Bible itself does not teach us to nuance our understanding of inspiration in any of the above ways. Consider 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” *All Scripture* – that’s everything, folks! Not just ideas or intentions but each and every *written word* comes from the Almighty.

The proposed nuances don’t work out in real life very well either. For example, it’s pretty hard to convince Catechism students that God created the world (as Genesis 1 teaches) but didn’t do it in 6 days (as Genesis 1 also teaches along with Exodus 20:11 & 31:17), but rather over a long, undetermined age. Or that Adam and Eve were not the first humans and the parents of the entire human race as Genesis 1 and Acts 17:26 teach but yet somehow were representatives of many already-existing humans (which is not taught anywhere in Scripture!). You try explaining to them that parts of Genesis 1 are true in their plain, literal meaning because they pertain to faith and the other parts of the same chapter are allegorical or symbolical because the Bible was not written to the standards of modern scientific or historical inquiry! They would look at you as if you’re off your rocker – and I could hardly blame them!

Reliability rests on Inspiration

The work of preaching and teaching hangs on the reliability of Scripture being the very Word of God. That reliability, in turn, hangs on the fact that *every word* is breathed out by the Spirit of God. The Bible makes no separation between words and ideas or between what’s true for faith matters and what’s true for so-called science or historical matters. The truth hangs together as one package given by God. It’s all or nothing.

The Apostle Peter speaks in a similar way in 2 Peter 2:21, “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” All that we have recorded in the original manuscripts of the Bible are the exact words carefully chosen by the Creator of heaven and earth put in print through the means of His chosen servants.

Christian Scholarship

When we have that firmly fixed in our minds, then we may enter the scholarly fields of scientific or historical (or other) investigation with clarity and confidence. Truth *can* be uncovered, for the God who inspired the Bible also created this world we are exploring! He even commands us to do so (Genesis 1:28). If we hold fast to His Word, we will be on the right track in correctly analyzing His creation.

There will always be puzzles, conundrums and things unexplainable (like miracles) because we are finite creatures with finite knowledge and limited abilities, including the corruption of our sinful hearts. But with the inspired Word of God and its revelation as our basis and starting point, we may undertake genuine, scholarly pursuits and expect to find *truth* – knowing it was put there by God in the first place – in each field.

Let’s keep in mind that unbelieving scholars begin with their own beliefs (atheism, agnosticism, materialism, etc.) which greatly affect their theories and conclusions. They often deny that it is so, but it is impossible to enter into any investigation without some basic, pre-existing beliefs and outlooks on the world (i.e. presuppositions). We all know that a bad foundation leads to a crooked, lop-sided structure. Their findings will be limited by their faulty starting point and will never be used by them to glorify the Maker.

But as Christian scholars, enlightened by the eyes of faith (given by grace alone), we may legitimately begin our studies with our own beliefs. And there’s no shame in stating it up front for the

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world to hear: *I believe that the Bible is God's inspired Word and therefore true and reliable in all it says.* That's a solid, square foundation which will lead, under God's blessing, to a sound structure, that is, to the advancement of human knowledge across many fields of study – all to the glory of God! Who wouldn't want to build on that?